

## *Wittgenstein on the Fallacy of the Argument from Pretence*

Edoardo Zamuner

### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the answer Wittgenstein gives to a specific version of the sceptical problem of other minds. The sceptic claims that the expressions of feelings and emotions can always be pretended. Wittgenstein contrasts this idea with two arguments. The first argument shows that other-ascriptions of psychological states are justified by experience of the satisfaction of criteria. The second argument shows that if one accepts the conclusion of the first argument, then one is compelled to accept the idea that pretence is justifiably ascribed on the same evidential basis, which justifies any other-ascriptions. The two arguments show that other-ascriptions of psychological states and pretence-ascriptions share the same evidential basis. This allows Wittgenstein to say that the sceptic's appeal to the possibility of pretence implies a contradiction.

### *The argument from expressions*

This argument entails an account of other-ascriptions of psychological states (hereafter referred to as p-states). When we ascribe a p-state to someone, we refer to a person's expressions of feelings such as his facial expression, the look in his eyes, his tone of voice, the combination of his body movements, what he says. These expressions provide evidence for ascriptions of p-states.

Wittgenstein provides a psychological argument in favour of the claim that we acquire information on people's p-states and that this information licenses knowledge claims such as "he is happy", "he is in pain", "he is glad to see her". The argument counters the sceptic's claim that any expression of feeling can always be pretended by arguing that expressions are part of the p-state itself and, as such, are evidence for someone's being in a p-state. The argument claims that genuine bodily and linguistic expressions are natural signs of a person's p-state. Wittgenstein says:

[T]he personal experiences of an emotion must in part be strictly localized experiences; for if I frown in anger I feel the muscular tension of the frown in my forehead, and if I weep, the sensations around my eyes are obviously part, and an important part, of what I feel. (Wittgenstein 1958, 103)

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein thinks that such an account of expressions as natural signs is often underestimated, in favour of the idea that expressions are mere devices which enable the subject to externalise his p-state. Wittgenstein acknowledges that there is no sharp dividing line between natural and artificial expressions of feeling. This is confirmed by the fact that most of these expressions may successfully be feigned. In that case, what we consider to be evidence of a p-state is not a natural sign but a device for deceiving an observer.

Consider a situation in which such a device is deployed. Martin knows that on the occasion of the annual meeting of the *Aristotelian Society* he will meet his friend Robert. They used to be close friends but, owing to a quarrel they had some years ago,

Martin could no longer be friendly with Robert. Nevertheless, Martin knows that openly hostile behaviour would be thought of negatively by his colleagues. So he decides to hide his feelings and to feign pleasure upon meeting Robert. Thus, when Martin meets Robert, he greets him warmly.

A person who observes the scene will be disposed to claim that Martin is glad to see Robert. What justifies this claim is the observer's having good reason for that thought. Here justification is provided by the observer's experience that criteria for someone being glad are satisfied. In this case, the satisfaction of criteria consists of the mere fact that Martin's observed behaviour fulfils a convention on how people behave when they are glad to meet someone.

This episode confirms that an expression of feeling can be feigned successfully. This casts a sceptical light on the information one gets from experiencing the satisfaction of criteria. *Criterion knowledge* is actually a type of knowledge open to defeat coming from further experience; evidence which is not considered when the observer originally claimed, or was disposed to claim, that Martin was glad to meet Robert. This means that experiencing the satisfaction of criteria provides the observer with information; such information can be revised in the light of a new, as yet unconsidered, experience.

Imagine that after attending the meeting between the two friends, the observer acquires additional information about their previous quarrel. Furthermore, he listens to a conversation in which Martin expresses his dislike for Robert. This information defeats the observer's previous claim that Martin was glad to meet Robert, and leads him to think that - for some reason - Martin was feigning his pleasure. This means that the former claim, although perfectly justified by the satisfaction of criteria, is defeated by information provided from further experience.

The possibility of pretence seems to discredit the reliability of these claims, which are justified by the satisfaction of criteria. In particular, the possibility of pretence lends viability to the idea that knowledge of other p-states is beyond the reach of our cognitive capacities. Wittgenstein has no definitive position on this issue. While in the *Philosophical Investigations* he acknowledges there is something as a content of experience which is absolutely private and subjective (Wittgenstein 1951, § 293), in his last writings he seems less keen on this idea. He is keen to show that other-ascriptions are perfectly justified and, as such, provide information on people's p-states. This information is a kind of *criteria knowledge*, whose main feature is to be defeasible in the light of new experience.

Crispin Wright, in his discussion of this issue, considers defeasibility an essential character of assertions on other minds and past events. The idea is that assertion has a *consequential character* (Wright 1984), which licenses some expectations about possible states of affairs deriving from or related to the original act of asserting. Those expectations include any new experience or any development of a state of affairs which defeats a former assertion. This does not make the original assertion merely probable - a sort of hypothesis waiting for further confirmation - but rather the assertion still carries information provided by the experience of the satisfaction of criteria. The question here is whether an assertion such as "Martin is glad to see Robert" provides information on the observer's experience of satisfaction of criteria or, rather, about Martin's p-state. The experience of criteria being satisfied justifies the claim that Martin is glad to meet Robert, even though this claim may be subject to withdrawal in the light of further *defeating factors* such as, for instance, the observer discovering that Martin was feigning his pleasure. All of this shows that assertions about other minds are justified by the experience of the satisfaction of

criteria; this experience in turn provides information which is always open to be defeated by further experience.

The argument from expressions does not provide any knock-down answer to the sceptic's claim that what one knows from the satisfaction of criteria can be nothing but a mere appearance (McDowell 1982). Nevertheless, it suggests a different account of other-ascriptions. Since we cannot establish any necessary link between one's behavior and one's true p-states, we have to consider the practice of making assertions on other minds as intrinsically defeasible by information coming from further experience.

The possibility of pretence seems to be one of the main *defeating factors*. But, as it will be shown by the argument from pretence, pretence-ascriptions are justified by the same kind of evidence which justifies other-ascriptions of p-states - the same p-ascriptions that the pretence is meant to defeat. As I will argue in the next section, this leaves room for a contradiction that weakens the power of the sceptic's claim.

### *The argument from pretence*

Wittgenstein considers pretence to be a p-state. This means that the predicate 'to pretend' is ascribed on the basis of evidence provided by someone's behavior. On this premise, Wittgenstein argues that the sceptic's claim implies a contradiction. In a passage from the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein remarks:

Do not look at the pretending as an embarrassing appendage, as a disruption of the pattern.

One can say "He is hiding his feelings". But that means that it is not a priori they are always hidden. Or: There are two statements contradicting one another: one is that feelings are essentially hidden; the other, that someone is hiding his feelings from me.

If I can never know what he is feeling, then neither can he pretend. (Wittgenstein 1992, 35)

Wittgenstein thinks that the sceptic holds two contradictory propositions. The first can be phrased thus:

(P1) other-ascriptions of p-states can always be defeated by *defeating factors* such as pretence, illusion, deception, hiding, and the like.

(P1) corresponds to Wittgenstein's claim that feelings are essentially hidden. This enables the sceptic to say that one can never know with certainty whether a person is really in a p-state. Thus, in front of a particular person, the sceptic will be inclined to claim a proposition such as

(P2) Martin is pretending to be in a p-state.

(P2) corresponds to Wittgenstein's claim that someone is hiding his feelings from someone else. Wittgenstein envisages a contradiction between (P1) and (P2). The contradiction becomes evident as soon as one tries to say that (P2) is not simply a rephrasing of (P1) but is a *justified statement*. I will examine this suggestion in detail.

The meaning of (P1) is that every expression of feeling can be feigned. Thus there is no way of knowing with certainty people's true p-states. This is consistent with the sceptic's disposition to say that people in general, and Martin in particular, can always pretend their p-states. According to this view, (P1) says that other-ascription can always be defeated by *defeating factors* such as pretence, illusion, deception, hiding and so forth. Here one can reasonably ask on what basis the sceptic holds (P1). At first glance, (P1) is justified by the experience that other-ascriptions are normally defeasible. But this does not respect the sceptic's point of view: if one wishes to preserve the coherence of the sceptic's attitude, then one has to consider (P1) as an *a priori* proposition, namely as a proposition that the sceptic holds independently of any experience.

This is a necessary condition. Since the sceptic claims that one cannot know with certainty people's true p-states, he does not base (P1) on any information gathered from people's behaviour. This means that if the sceptic really wants to be consistent with (P1), he is compelled to take seriously the fact that any other-ascription is defeasible and hence unreliable. Because of this, justification for holding with (P1) cannot come from experience of the satisfaction of criteria. Then the sceptic must hold with (P1) *a priori*, without relying on the justificatory role of experience. It worth noting that, if we accept this view, the *a priori* justification the sceptic needs remains obscure.

What I have observed so far leaves another aspect unclear: the linguistic status of (P2). It is arguable that, if the sceptic really wants to hold with (P1), (P2) cannot be in any way asserted. This is because the act of asserting entails justification, such as the utterer having evidence that Martin is pretending his feelings. This entails that the sceptic relies on Martin's behaviour as a compound of evidence revealing his p-state. But the sceptic who really wants to hold with (P1) and acts accordingly cannot rely on anybody's behaviour since, as we have seen, expressions of p-states are essentially defeasible and unreliable. From this, it can be derived that the sceptic cannot make any justified assertion on other minds. Then the only way to hold with (P2) without countering what (P1) prescribes is to consider (P2) as a mere rephrasing of (P1). In this case, (P2) is deprived of any informative value. This paradoxical outcome has the only virtue of preserving the inner coherence of the sceptic's attitude. Nevertheless, this has the obvious consequence of depriving the sceptic's point of view of any philosophical appeal.

Wittgenstein thinks that the fallacy is revealed as soon as the sceptic leaves his isolation and tries to assert (P2) on a correct evidential basis. In this case, it seems impossible to hold with (P1) and at the same time assert (P2). A genuine assertion needs to be justified - for instance a genuine other-ascription is justified by the experience of the satisfaction of criteria. Then if (P2) is asserted, it needs to be justified. This leads to the following scenario: we have (P1) which constrains the assertion of (P2) and says that it cannot be justified by anything in the present state of affairs. If one accepts this constraint, it seems that the only way the sceptic can justify (P2) is by referring to some background reasons - reasons which are independent of the present situation and which license the assertion. For instance, the sceptic can refer to indirect evidence that people can pretend to be in p-states - for instance by providing examples of pretence.

This move leads the sceptic straight into contradiction. Pretence is indeed a p-state which one can recognise on the basis of a person's behaviour. Thus the sceptic is justified in claiming that it is possible to pretend p-states by virtue of his experience that people pretend to be in p-states. This would make (P2) a statement asserting a

conclusion drawn from people's behaviour. But one has to acknowledge that the way in which the sceptic obtains justification for asserting (P2) counters (P1). This is because, in order to justifiably assert (P2), the sceptic needs to experience people's pretending to be in p-states and this presupposes that he relies on their expressions of feelings and emotions. As we have seen, such reliance is excluded by (P1).

This shows that there is no way of asserting (P2) and, at the same time, being consistent with the *a priori* proposition that expresses the sceptic's point of view. The argument shows that if one takes (P1) to be a premise from which one derives one's epistemic standing, one cannot make any genuine assertion. This is inconsistent with the requirement that any assertion about other minds, as well as assertions about someone feigning his p-state, need to be justified by evidence drawn from experience.

### **Conclusions**

The first argument introduces the idea that *critical knowledge* can always be defeated by further experience. This casts a sceptical light on the reliability of other-ascriptions. The second argument shows that recognising that a *defeating factor* can occur brings with it the fact that one experiences that criteria for *defeaters* are satisfied. This means that, if the sceptic really wants to assert (P2), he needs a certain degree of justification. Here, justification is provided by the same bodily and linguistic behaviour, which licenses any other-ascription. In other words, what justifies the doubt or even the certainty that some defeating factors occur, is experience of the satisfaction of criteria. This is because *defeating factors* are recognised on the same evidential basis as those p-states that they are meant to defeat. This is consistent with the idea that a *defeater* is information gathered from people's observable states, which counters a former ascription of p-states. The occurrence of a *defeater* is within the range of the expectations licensed by the former ascription.

The fallacy Wittgenstein envisages is the contradiction between the *a priori* status of the sceptic's point of view expressed by (P1) and the *a posteriori* conditions, which justify assertions about other minds, or retractions of those assertions. From Wittgenstein's point of view, what the sceptic fails to see is that, even though other-ascriptions are *a priori* defeasible, conditions for asserting that some defeats occur are *a posteriori*, namely depending on the utterer's experience that *defeating factors* exist.

### **Literature**

McDowell, John 1982, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXVIII, 455-79.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1958 *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1992 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology. The Inner and the Outer*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wright, Crispin 1984, "Second Thoughts about Criteria", *Synthese*, 58, 383-405.